

Ephesians 5:21f

1. The section that is to come is controversial for our society for obvious reasons. Before we delve into it we should remind ourselves what the book is about. Many times these passages are taken from the book as supporting evidence for particular issues that we bring to the book. This should be avoided. This is not to say that these passages don't speak to issues, but what they say they say to the issues Paul is addressing first within the context of the book and secondarily to issues not in the book.
2. The first thing we should do is recognize something about the trio of issues Paul is addressing. These three relationships were the primary relationships that a household within the Roman Empire would revolve around. See the sheet on family life in the Roman Empire. Our pattern of family life today is quite different on many levels. We can better understand the heart of Paul's teaching today if we understand the pattern of family life then. One famous quotation communicates much regarding attitudes towards women in the ancient Hellenistic world: "We have courtesans for our pleasure, prostitutes (young female slaves) for our daily physical use, wives to bring up legitimate children and to be faithful stewards in household matters." Demosthenes 340BC.
3. You will notice that different translations either treat verse 21 as part of the preceding paragraph and others with the following. There are grammatical arguments that go both ways. Verse 19 through 21 have a series of participles that seem to function as imperatives. At the same time it is undeniable that verse 21 is closely linked to verse 22 because 22 has no verb. Verse 21 provides the verb for verse 22. This pretty clearly shows that verse 21 is the principle which will be spelled out throughout the section on household relations. This is pretty obvious because later manuscripts (as the English translations do) repeat the verb in verse 22.
4. Before we get to "be subject" we should look at "in the fear of Christ". This is the only place where this phrase comes from and many have legitimately asked why it appears at all? Some think it is a transmission of "the fear of the LORD". See the concordance list. If you jump to verse 33 the wife is told to "fear her husband. In the OT it is also clear that "fear" is deeply connected with "love". We are also commanded to "love" the LORD. It is also important to realize that "love" in this covenantal language was also treaty language. The vassal was bound to "love" the sovereign. It is clear that the emotional aspect is not front and center in this meaning of "love". The sovereign cares not much about the emotional life of the vassal, whether the vassal likes their place, but rather the faithfulness and loyalty of the vassal.

5. The debate over this passage begins with where to break the paragraph. It gets seriously joined over the understanding of “be subject”. The verb itself is fairly clear but how it should be understood with “to one another” is where the battle lies. There are essentially two camps.
 - a. One asserts that Paul is exhorting here “mutual submission”.
 - i. Look at the “one another” passages in the NT, especially in Paul. It reflects amazing mutuality.
 - ii. The reciprocity in the follow passage is in stark contrast to the culture
 - b. The other that Paul is exhorting submission to authority.
 - i. This passage is not necessarily read symmetrically
 - ii. There are instances of “one another” that aren’t necessarily totally mutual

6. A few things are clear about this paragraph:
 - a. Paul is addressing a context in which it is assumed that the male is over the household. There is discussion if Paul is trying to resist a trend of egalitarianism but that is more speculative.
 - b. Paul clearly ties the relationship of the wife to the husband to the church to Christ. The difficulty is to figure out at times which illustrates which. This is highlighted by the “saving” language that tends to get overlooked in the contemporary gender battles. When there are polemics the tendency on both sides is to cherry pick rather than to seriously engage the entire content which in most cases clouds the “clear teaching” that both sides are using the text in an attempt to support their position. The cloudiness of the other material should hold us back from too simplistically applying words specifically given to one context over to our own. What will arise will likely not be a specific command for our context but a general understanding of the implications of the gospel for many contexts. It is likely neither side of the conflict will be fully satisfied if their desire is somehow to use the text to gain an upper hand over the other.